

The Influence of Lincoln On World Thought

Speech Delivered by Honorable Charles Kerr at the
Lincoln Club Banquet in Louisville,
February 12, 1918

Compliments of
FAYETTE COUNTY REPUBLICAN CLUB
March, 1918.

"It is no ordinary occasion that has brought us together. While within the circle here gathered there is present a permeating feeling of good will, we know that without the whole world has been turned into one agonizing Garden of Gethsemane. That cup which, as a nation, we had prayed might pass has been pressed to our lips, and we must now drain it to the dregs. But tonight between us and that Calvary of the nations which extends from the North Sea to the Adriatic, where those of our own blood and our own tongue are being nailed to the cross of imperial tyranny, there extends that mystic chord of human love and human sympathy which has touched the better angles of our nature. And so, for the moment, evicting from our thoughts all rivalries, all jealousies, let us rise superior to all considerations of self, remembering only that we have foregathered here for the purpose of giving expression to that veneration in which we hold the natal anniversary of one of the few, the immortal few, whose names defy oblivion.

Life Immortal.

"And what, may we inquire, is that indestructible part of our being which survives the shock of cold obstruction? That something for which Plato longed, and without which the cravings of the human soul can never be gratified?

"There is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branches thereof will not cease."

"In these pregnant words, uttered in despair and wrapped in hesitating doubt, the old Sheik from the Land of Uz, caught, in recurring nature, man's first gleam of the immortal, his first conception of that which survives the fallen trunk. And if tonight this old Son of the Plains could emerge from the sand-strewn, desert grave, o'er which the Syrian stars have been twinkling for forty centuries, clothed and in his right mind, and once more propound that oft-quoted query, 'If a man die shall he live again?' here, here in the presence of these living, here in the spirit that has brought us together, the old Patriarch would find an answer to his query, for the spirit of Abraham Lincoln as truly lives today, as surely exercises its influence over the thoughts and minds of men, as it did in the soul-burdened days of his existence.

"There may come to us a certain exultant pride in the fact that Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky; that the lowly

hut through whose portals he caught his first gleam of day has become a pilgrim's shrine for every land, but greater far is the exultation which we find in the fact that his has become a name and his an influence which extends to the utmost reaches of human thought and human achievement. Manacled by poverty, neglected by nature; the pawn of Destiny, the victim of cruel and inexorable Tragedy; as one who suffered all the humiliations, all the contradictions of birth, life and character, and as one into whose life there came not an hour of unalloyed happiness, the source of his great power over men becomes all the more baffling, as the years recede.

Lincoln Most Sympathetic of Men.

"And yet man more human never lived. Whatever concerned man was of interest to him. He yearned for human sympathy with the same ardor that he gave it. We search in vain among the world's immortals for one into whose soul there entered less of malice or out of which there came more of human charity. Of the imperishable few none was ever more self-effacing, none more free from self-elation. He could follow while he led, and yield while he resisted. An enigma of apparent contradiction, in purpose none was ever more determined.

"In every great character there will be found negative as well as positive currents. In this respect this strange, inexplicable world figure was no exception. His place in history has been made secure no less by what he did not do than by what he did. In character building he was his own architect. The plans and specifications were all his. Every stone, every piece of material that went into that edifice was selected by his own hand. When, standing in a Southern slave mart, he said to John Hanks, 'If ever I get an opportunity to strike that institution, John, I will strike it hard,' he laid the corner stone; when, standing at the Hampton Roads Peace Conference, he said to one of the commissioners, pointing to a blank piece of paper, 'Stephens, let me write 'Union' at the top of that sheet, and you may write whatever you please beneath it,' he put in place the keystone; and when, standing on the field at Gettysburg, he delivered that poem which will live as long as the tongue in which it was uttered, he adorned it with an imagery of speech as delicate as any conception that was ever traced by a Titian or an Angelo. And so he builded for all ages.

"Thus it is that here and there we begin to catch a glimpse of the secret of his power. Called upon to direct the course of the nation in the great crisis through which it was to pass, the Lincoln of history began to emerge. It was not a mere chance that the books which constituted his first library were the Bible, a life of Washington, Pilgrim's Progress and history of the United States. Throughout his whole life we may trace their influence. From the sacred volume he had taken counsel of the fact that of all the woes that had come into the life of poor old Job none was more disastrous than that which resulted from the selection of a cabinet that darkened counsel by words without wisdom. From that same volume he had learned how the Son of Man had selected his cabinet from men of every walk and station in life, including a Publican, who was a Roman tax gatherer. From the life of Washington he had learned how that great patriot had composed his cabinet of men holding antagonistic views of thought concerning the policies which should control the government that had just been born into existence. These precedents he turned to profit. To his own cabinet board he called some of the greatest men of the nation. That he was not afraid to hold council with the greatest minds of the country is clearly demonstrated in the character of men that he designated as his counsellors. Three of them had been candidates for the nomination against him. Some had not even supported him. Not a few that believed they were superior to him in presidential capacity, and that their chief duty would be to make a President out of the nominal head of government, as Webster had tried to do with Harrison. Of Seward this was certainly true. But to each in turn there came a quiet disillusionment. With the knowledge of the fact that they were not President came also the knowledge that they were something more than head clerks in their several departments. It was here he demonstrated that envy and jealousy had no place in his great nature.

Lincoln Shows Greatness.

"To the task of winning the war every consideration was made subservient. Efficiency in every department was the first prerequisite. When it was early demonstrated that Cameron was not equal to the great responsibilities that had been cast upon the War Department—and for other reasons, less creditable—diplomacy found a place for him at St. Petersburg. In filling

that vacancy the real Lincoln never shone to better advantage. Not only had Stanton been a member of Buchanan's cabinet, not only had he been an uncompromising Democrat, and a defender of the constitutionality of slavery, but he was personally inimical to the President. Not only had he scorned and insulted him in private, and criticised him in public, but had done what he could to defeat him for President. Yet seeing in Stanton just the kind of man that was needed in the War Department, he was selected, notwithstanding the fact the President had a full knowledge of his attitude not only towards him, but towards his administration. As an act of generous magnanimity history furnishes no parallel. But in the end Stanton was won, and in the tragic hour of death, it was Stanton that consigned the name of Lincoln to the ages.

"The critical may say that these were but the acts of a sagacious politician, suited only to the conditions under which they were applied. But is that true? Among the statesmen produced by this war, the one man that thus far stands out pre-eminently above all others, the burden-bearer of the Allied cause, the great English Premier, sits in council with Radical, Conservative, Liberal and Socialist. Through the policies exemplified by Lincoln every element in the British Empire has been consolidated and unified, so that today the British war machine is as perfect in all its parts as that of the Kaiser himself. And when this great man of the hour, for Lloyd George is as much the present man of the hour as was Lincoln the man of his hour, gave to the world the reason why the sword of England had been unsheathed, he could find no words more appropriate than the words of Lincoln, uttered 50 years before:

"We accepted this war for a worthy object, and the war will end when that object is attained. Under God, I hope it will not end until that time."

"Of all the war aim literature that has recently been put in circulation, there will be found in none of it any utterance that is more comprehensive than the simple words here repeated. The God of our fathers only knows what may be the part which America will take in this great struggle. We trust it is to be a decisive part, and if it is, do we invade the realms of fanciful conjecture if we attempt to trace that result to him who 'gave the last full measure of devotion' that this nation might endure? If the world is to be made safe for democracy through the govern-

ment of the people of the United States, that government itself must needs have been saved from destruction. And by whom was it saved if not by him whose name we honor here tonight?

Principles Can Not Die.

"Principles are not subject to the law of change, neither do they die. So vital are the principles for which Lincoln stood that we cannot realize that it is they that live, not he. And as we look back upon the work of his hand there come to us moments of anxious thought for the future as we the better appreciate those striking traits of character which enabled him to sway the minds of others, and to win where others would have failed.

"We realize today that had this great master of thought rejected the proffered assistance of those who differed with him in his political views and policies; had he confined his appointments to his own party; had he selected a strong partisan cabinet; had he sought to subordinate the legislative to the executive, and make of himself a supreme dictator; had he possessed an attitude of mind that would have made of all those who differed from him his personal antagonists; had his bearing been one of entire self sufficiency, that he must have failed. We know, too, that if he had placed all the commercial forces of the country in the hands of the Doctors of Law, Doctors of Medicine, Doctors of Physics, Doctors of Literature, Doctors of Philosophy and Doctors of Hysteria; if he had shown an overweening preference for the doctrinaires, visionaires and minionaires; if he had dismissed Stanton and filled his place with a pacifist, there would have been no Appomattox and we would not be here tonight.

"But night was never so dark that Hope did not see a star. That for which Abraham Lincoln gave his life the civilized nations of the world are fighting for today. His ideals are their ideals. His aspirations are their aspirations. His thoughts still breathe, his words still burn. Never was he more

The pillar of a nation's hope,
The center of a world's desire,

than he is today. I believe his spirit has a greater hold upon the people of this nation than it has ever had. I believe that under the influence of that spirit, come what may, American

valor will win in the end. When Napoleon said it matters not how many battles England may lose she always wins the last one, he might, with equal truth, have made the same application to America.

The Nation's Big Crisis.

"Today a world's crisis is upon us. We face a darker period than we did in the darkest hour of the Civil War. Only through a co-ordination of every element of strength can we hope to win. It is a cause that rises above party, above self, above all other considerations. Only through self-subordination, self-effacement, self-denial can we attain the full measure of that peace for which we fight. Through him who possessed these attributes of mind and soul we once were saved—and these are potent to save now. I do not believe that government by the people will fail. The ashes of the dead of other days have been requickened. The future of humanity is in the balance. The sons of Italy are fighting with a courage and a grandeur that is worthy of the day 'when to be a Roman was greater than a king'—the spirit of Caesar still lives. France is fighting with a valor and an ardor that surpasses the most glorious traditions of the 'Grand Armee'—the spirit of Napoleon still lives. England rules the wave with that same defiance that has marked her course since the days of the Armada—the spirit of Nelson still lives. With these we have joined, and with these we will triumph—for the spirit of Lincoln still lives.

"O! spirit of the immortal dead, draw nearer, draw nearer. 'Amid the encircling gloom' draw nearer, draw nearer. At a moment when we stand in the presence of a foe whose inhumanities have broken the heart of the world, and the very soul cries aloud to the God of its being for succor, draw nearer, draw nearer, and let us trust that those into whose keeping have been placed the destinies of this Nation may be guided and directed by that same nobility of spirit which gave guidance and direction to thee, and in the great task that lies before them we do here and now pledge them 'our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor,' confident in the hope, steadfast in the faith, that they 'will do the right, as God gives them to see the right.'"

